

Counties Urged to Join Information Network

Info/California Expands Statewide

By Lea Brooks

County officials are embracing Info/California, an information computer network designed to make government services more convenient to the public that is expanding to urban areas throughout the state.

California counties are jumping on the Info/California bandwagon.

By October, 100 Info/California kiosks featuring easy-to-use, touch-screen computers will be installed by the state in libraries, shopping centers and other sites frequented by the public in urban areas.

During the 2.5-year pilot in Sacramento and San Diego counties, thousands of people used Info/California to obtain information on a myriad of state services, including job opportunities, vehicle registration and driver's licenses.

The state Health and Welfare Agency

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Data Center, which developed Info/California with IBM as an advanced technology project, is inviting all levels of government to integrate their services with the system — for a fee.

County officials are responding with a multitude of ideas to use Info/California to make government more accessible to their constituents. They are working with the Data



Counties have many ideas for Info/California.

Center to develop applications ranging from payments for traffic citations and property taxes to the ordering of library books.

"We are marketing these kiosks to government agencies at all levels," explained Jim Henderson, who provides customer support for Info/California at the Data Center. "We are in business like a private company. We're buying the kiosks and providing all related services, including banking, marketing, maintenance and application development as well as hardware and site determination.

"The bottom line for counties is coming up with funding for their applications. Coun-

ties have to make a case from a business standpoint based on the benefits to their citizens."

Henderson believes most of the applications on Info/California will be specific to a local area. It doesn't make sense, he said, for kiosks in Stanislaus County to provide information on services offered only in San Diego County.

Seventeen kiosks will be installed in Sacramento, Alameda and Contra Costa counties beginning in July. Another 30 kiosks will be hooked up in the Los Angeles area, followed by 30 more in the San Francisco and Sacramento areas. The rest are bound for the Fresno and San Diego areas.

The state is not installing kiosks in rural counties in the near future because "there aren't enough applications there to cover our costs," he explained. However, counties can purchase their own kiosks through the state's master contract with IBM, which was approved in February after a procurement process prolonged by a protest from the unsuccessful bidder.

Each kiosk costs approximately \$20,000 to \$22,000, depending on the model. The estimated cost per application runs from \$5,000 to \$45,000.

"The difference between the low and high end depends on what information is processed and whether the transactions have to be spun off to other computers," explained Charles Wright, management information services director of Stanislaus County.

Stanislaus plans to purchase three kiosks to add to the two that are being installed in the county by the state. County officials are eyeing potential sites at popular shopping malls in Modesto, the county seat, and want to record a "specific Stanislaus greeting by a local person of note" for their kiosks.

"We in Stanislaus County have realized over the past several years that our county message doesn't get out very well," Wright said. "Most of the time we're doing our day-to-day work and don't spend the time to tell people what we do.

"We believe Info/California will make the public better aware of the kinds of services we provide. The technology is here to deliver those services in places where the public congregates. More people go to the mall than to the county administration building. By having our messages and services available at the mall, we believe we can show people we do deliver services — and deliver

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them very cost effectively."

Stanislaus County's initial application will allow library users to access an online library system and reserve books for later pickup at branch libraries. Eventually, Wright believes the public will be able to access a wide range of information tracked by the county, including assessed property values and moving violations.

"Tremendous Success"

The pilot — 15 kiosks in Sacramento and San Diego counties — began in 1991 and primarily focused on services provided by state agencies (see California County, July/August 1991). For example, users could access the Employment Development Department's Job Match program, which links an applicant's preferred location and qualifications with a list of job opportunities updated each evening.

By using a credit card, they could renew their vehicle's registration with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) simply by touching relevant information into the touch screen. The pilot kiosks also accepted credit card payments from California natives wishing to order copies of their birth certificates. Non-California natives were provided with information on how to order their birth certificates.

Information was also available on a number of other services, including student aid, community colleges, state universities and the University of California system, state parks, AIDS/HIV, hunting and fishing licenses, earthquake preparedness and social services and job training programs.

"The Info/California pilot has been a tremendous success that far exceeded our expectations," Henderson said. "We proved the concept — that kiosks can be good for government — a long, long time ago."

The pilot kiosks hosted 354,697 "user sessions" between Oct. 23, 1991 — the date of installation — and Feb. 16, 1994, according to a recent analysis by North Communications, an IBM subcontractor that has been deeply involved in the project. Each kiosk hosted an average of 36 users per day. The analysis also found:

- 54 percent of surveyed respondents said that Info/California saved them a phone call, letter or trip to a government office.
- 71 percent of users found the system easy to use.
- 81 percent felt better prepared to con-

tact a government office.

- 66 percent learned something new.
- 67 percent plan to return to a kiosk for other information.

- 56 percent of usage was outside of Monday-Friday 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.

- 23 percent of users selected the Spanish language option. All segments can be viewed and printed in English and Spanish.

- The busiest sites were the Arden Fair Mall in Sacramento and Horton Plaza in San Diego, which had an average of 63 users a day. Sacramento's Carmichael Library kiosk had the most users in one day — 424.

Twelve of the pilot kiosks are owned by the state and will continue to operate until they are replaced with the newer version. The other three are owned by IBM and have already been removed.

With the pilot concluded, state agencies now have to cover the full costs for their applications on Info/California. The Data Center has already signed up DMV, which will provide its services networkwide.

The Department of Health Services, which offered the birth certificate service during the pilot, is "really interested in continuing," Henderson said. "We've sold enough birth certificates — 30 to 40 per month — to know that it's a plausible thing to do."

The Employment Development Department is undergoing a reorganization and hasn't reached a decision on whether Job Match will continue on Info/California.

Counties Enthused

Contra Costa County officials have been told five kiosks will be installed in their county and have been suggesting possible sites to the state.

"We've been waiting for this to be born for so long — we've always been interested in participating," said Marinelle Thompson, Contra Costa County's director of data processing services. "We have no experience yet with this technology, but it appears to be a very promising way to serve the public in a more convenient manner."

One application being explored would enable the public to obtain building permits for routine projects.

see "Info/California" — page 30

"Info/California" — from page 21

"At a minimum, we hope to offer general information about the county on the kiosks help people know where to go for certain types of services," she said. "Down the road we are particularly interested in offering services that help people avoid a trip to downtown Martinez (the county seat). Parking difficult in Martinez and we are very co-

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- Charles Wright

scious about trying to relieve traffic congestion and reduce air pollution. We believe people would find it very attractive to pay fee or fine with a credit card at a kiosk in mall."

Contra Costa County officials appreciate Info/California's "cooperative process" so that we don't have to go to the total expense of providing a kiosk," Thompson added. "Since it's a joint effort, no one level of government has to support the whole project."

San Francisco is also enthused about the possibilities presented by Info/California, according to Lynn Baron, chief of systems in the Controller's Information Services Division New Technology Unit.

Baron's goal is to get a single application up and running on Info/California to use as a success story to encourage other departments to participate. She is currently targeting the District Attorney's Family Support Bureau, which is federally mandated to advertise certain services.

"I see the kiosk as a way of providing the information to those who need assistance," she said. "A number of other departments are interested, but aren't ready to move yet. This isn't going to happen overnight. We want to start out small. I believe that once we get one department going, everything will come together."

Info/California will be showcased at the IBM booth during the Government Technology Conference May 18-20 at the Sacramento Convention Center. CSAC is a co-sponsor of the conference.